

Guidelines for Research with Refugee Background Communities

Prepared by ChangeMakers Refugee Forum

These guidelines should be read in conjunction with ChangeMakers's [*Standards of Engagement*](#).

Who We Are

ChangeMakers Refugee Forum is a refugee-led non-government organisation that brings together 13 refugee background communities. We are collaborators, advocates, capacity builders, researchers and brokers.

People who arrive in Aotearoa New Zealand as refugees have one thing in common – they have been forced to leave their homes and flee. They are seldom able to return safely to their own country. New Zealand becomes their only home.

The Research Issue

Researchers increasingly ask ChangeMakers Refugee Forum to take part in research activities and to link researchers with refugee communities. While we want to encourage interest in, and interaction with our communities, we also want to ensure that our communities are respected and that researchers assist us to meet the needs of our communities.

These guidelines are designed to assist you in your interactions with refugee background communities, to reduce demands on our communities and to ensure that the outcomes of any research benefit our communities.

Working with Refugee Background People

Values and Attitudes

If you:

- Work *with* us, not *on* us,
- Respect us,
- Build on our strengths,
- Contribute to our wellbeing as individuals and communities,
- Recognise and accept that we former refugees come from a very wide range of countries, cultures and religions; that we come from a wide range of educational and employment backgrounds; that we have all suffered trauma; and that our experiences of settlement in New Zealand are varied,

And accept:

- That while some of us have always spoken English, others have had to learn English on arrival in New Zealand, and even those of us for whom English is a first language struggle with your accents,

- That many of us have had bad experiences with authorities that make us suspicious and nervous about answering some questions,
- That written forms are extremely difficult if not impossible for many of us,
- That most of our communities are small and our day to day lives are demanding, and
- That while we may look and sound different to you, we are human beings just like you,

We have a good chance of working together well.

Questions for Planning Research

Can you contribute to our identified research needs? If not:

- Can you help us do the research rather than doing it yourself, or work in partnership with us?
- Who else is currently conducting research on your target groups and is there a way you can work with them to reduce the demands on the subjects?
- How can you ensure the research process and outcome contribute to strengthening and increasing wellbeing of refugee background communities and/or individuals?
- How will you ensure that our knowledge remains our intellectual property?
- How will you check with us that you have understood us?
- How will you build trust?
- How will you find the people you want to involve in the research?
- How will you validate our experiences and worldviews?
- How much time do you need from subjects, organisers and translators?
Are there creative methodologies you can use that benefits participants in the process of the research as well as in the outcomes?
- How can you ensure you give more than you take?

Considerations

- Language – Do you need translators?

How will you ensure the translator understands you and that there is a relationship of trust with the subject/s? If you are interviewing, what questions can you ask to ensure you have understood the person?

- Trust – do you have relationships within refugee background communities so that people can talk to each other about who you are and what you want?

Refugees have generally been in situations where telling the truth to authority figures is very dangerous. Learning to trust those in authority in New Zealand takes time and development of relationships.

- Ethics – How are you going to express each of the values listed above?

Most researchers who are funded have formal ethical requirements to fulfil. We ask that you add to your ethical considerations our list of values.

- Prior knowledge – How can you approach the research interactions with open minds and hearts?

We find that those who hear us best – and most accurately – are those who come with open minds and hearts. What you have read about us may be distorted or reflect the experiences and views of some of us but not all of us.

Remember that when you share a history, culture and language with research participants you take much about the context for granted. There is seldom this shared background in interactions with refugees.

Even if you are a former refugee your background and current experiences can be significantly different to others. Achieving an open mind and heart includes being humble, admitting how little you know about those you are seeking information from, taking time to listen deeply, and increasing your awareness of your own preconceptions, attitudes, beliefs and cultural assumptions.

- Relationships – What sort of relationships do you have with refugee background communities now? How can you build these?

The nature of the relationship between the researcher and the researched is critical. Activities such as attending refugee background community events and taking part in refugee forums can help you learn how we live and work, make you more familiar and open up dialogue. When research is happening, watch body language as well as listening to speech. But suspend judgement – it is about discernment not judgement – body language can have different meanings. Watch people's eyes for indications of engagement and interest. Respect silence – some things are too hard to share.

- Focus groups and group research

Age, gender, ethnicity, family, and clan relationships are all things that can affect what people will and won't say in focus groups or other group research situations.

- Costs – Can you build in costs for organisers, community leaders, translators and subject costs into your budget?

These communities are generally very poorly resourced.

- Topics – Can you find a way of keeping your focus but within a holistic framework? Can you frame topics to build on our strengths?

Topics are interrelated. For example, research on health can tell others a lot about housing and work as well. How can you take this into account in your research design? Can you produce results that acknowledge our issues and needs but in a way that strengthens us, and perceptions of our communities?

- Methodologies – What methodologies are most likely to gather information that enhances the wellbeing of those from whom it is collected in the process of collecting as well as in the outcome?

- Accuracy and Approval – How are you going to check your results or outputs with the individuals and/or communities concerned?

Balance the need to give individuals and/or communities control over what we give you with the need to minimise demands on us.

Help Us Help You

1. Check our research priorities on our website before you plan your research. Can you assist us meet our aims?

If we can work together to achieve our joint aims we can ensure best use is made of limited funding and the process helps build constructive relationships between refugee communities and the rest of New Zealand society

2. Check our values.

Show us how your aims and plans support these values.

3. Register your research plans on our research database.

This helps us ensure that communities are not overburdened with researchers and allows us to provide you with the support you need.

4. Consider the cost in time to establish relationships with the individuals and/or communities, to pay a former refugee who is trusted by the proposed subjects to introduce the research project, and people to proposed subjects and to give feedback on the process.
5. Consider methodologies that contribute to our lives in the process of the research as well as the outcome. Sharing appropriate parts of your life and your experience is part of building rapport and building trust. Give as well as take in the research interaction.
6. Consider methods of sharing the research results with the individuals and/or communities.
7. If you need assistance from ChangeMakers give recognition of this in some way and ensure there is adequate time for ChangeMakers to respond to you. Commenting on proposals takes time.

A Note on Methodologies

When working with people from very different backgrounds to you, for whom English is a second language and with people who have very good reasons not to trust authority figures, standard survey techniques are unreliable. For example, a ‘straightforward’ question such as ‘how many children do you have?’ can be problematic because there may be children left behind in camps and their fate is unknown.

Most of New Zealand’s refugee communities come from non-western backgrounds. The western individualistic and linear styles of research are not effective means of collecting

information. More effective methods are active listening, story-telling, creative exercises such as ChangeMakers drama, 'Strong Families, Strong Children', and types of action research. These are more holistic in approach and gather more reliable information.

References/Further Information

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